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# **South Korea's Gendered Nationhood: a case study of heavyweight weightlifter Jang Mi-ran**

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# **South Korea's Gendered Nationhood: a case study of heavyweight weightlifter Jang Mi-ran**

## **Abstract**

The research aimed to examine the androcentric nature of South Korea's nationhood. South Korea's former heavyweight weightlifter Jang Mi-ran and her sporting career exhibit the difficulties and possibilities that South Korean women are faced with. On the one hand she displays the stronghold of conservative gender order, and on the other hand she has rewritten a script for women and positioned them differently in the national imaginary. As an emphatic gender symbol, Jang compelled many participants to rethink what it means to be a woman in South Korea today, which could alter the character of the nation. A number of group interviews took place during the 2008 Beijing and 2012 London Olympics, featuring ethnically-Korean female participants exclusively - 42 in total. 22 women in 6 groups were interviewed during the Beijing Olympics and 20 in 4 groups during the London event. Their ages varied from 19 to 39, most of them had an undergraduate or post graduate degree and they were all professionals.

**Key words:** Gender, Nation, Sport, Confucianism, South Korea

## **Introduction**

Nations depend on a powerful construction of gender, which represents relations to political power (McClintock, 1995). Nevertheless, the relationship between gender and nation has long been conspicuously overlooked in academia. Since the mid-1980s, however, feminist scholars have begun to criticise the exclusion of women from dominant discourses

of the nation, nationalism and national identity and have begun to redress this neglect. Investigations into such exclusion are important because they help to unravel the ways in which hegemonic discourses serve to sustain men's domination over women socially, culturally and materially in a given society (Hogan, 2003). The aim of this research is to contribute to the growing body of work in this field.

Hogan (2009) argues that, to date, academic investigations into gender and nation have tended to focus on particular historical contexts such as war, colonialism or other social upheavals. Concerned that it may be misleading that gendering in the national imaginary takes place only in historic or turbulent moments in the past and that gender appears fixed and unchangeable, she calls for the examination of mundane contexts and pastimes to critically explore the intricate workings of gender and the nation. In response to her suggestion, this research is intended to explore South Korea's gendered nationhood and national identity in relation to a popular and culturally significant pastime, which is sport and sport spectacle.

With the Amazonian figure of 170cm and 115kg, Jang Mi-ran, born in 1983, was a phenomenal South Korean female weightlifter, who had been a dominant force in the women's over-75kg category internationally until she retired in 2013. Among her numerous achievements, highlights include the silver medal at the 2004 Athens Olympics, the world championship trophies in 2005 to 2009 and the gold medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Her unorthodox profession and outstanding performances, together with her overwhelming physique, had garnered intense media attention domestically partly because they destabilised South Korea's normative gender order. In this regard, Jang offers a point of departure to explore the ways in which specific notions of womanhood, and by implication manhood, have been naturalised in South Korea, shaping nationhood and national identity in a particular fashion.

Sport is an important arena in which the hegemonic notions of the nation, national identity and nationhood are reinforced, but simultaneously it also offers a crucial space which allows for the politicisation of inclusion and exclusion in and beyond sport. The research examines the androcentric nature of South Korea's nationhood as revealed through all-female participants' perceptions of Jang Mi-ran and also the emergence of counter-narratives of gender and nation, which potentially pose a threat to hegemonic ideologies.

### Feminist Critiques of Gender and Nation

Having been claimed to be 'the most pertinent form of collective identity nowadays' (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 593), the nation and, by association, nationalism and national identities have generated numerous academic debates over the years. Indeed, Bairner (2001) claims that the nation has been 'one of the most discussed concepts in modern social and political thought' (p. 2). Yet what is striking in the popular theorisations of the nation, nationalism and national identity is the conspicuous absence of women's contributions and histories to the production of national consciousness and nationhood. Male academics' indifference to the gendering of the nation has been commonplace, and unfortunately feminists have also been slow to recognise the significance of gender in understanding the character of the nation and nationhood (McClintock, 1995). Since the mid-1980s, however, a growing number of feminist scholars have criticised the gender-blindness of dominant discourses on the nation, nationalism and national identity, and have explored the significance of woman in these subjects (Enloe, 1989; Hall et. al., 1993; Hogan, 2003, 2009; McClintock, 1993, 1995; Sharp, 1996; Wilford, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

A leading scholar of the nation is Anderson (1983), commonly known as a 'modernist'. He advocates that the nation is a 'recent' modern phenomenon and cultural artefacts, which

replaced religious communities and dynastic realms around the 18<sup>th</sup> or the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to him, these changes were brought forward by the development of print technology and capitalism, the convergence of which enabled people to 'imagine' a community with themselves as its members. Importantly, this community is called a nation, hence his famous claim for the nation as 'an imagined community' (p. 6-7).

The nation that Anderson paints seems united and harmonious, where everyone imagines the nation in more or less the same way. However, nations are internally divided along the lines of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality etc. In relation to Anderson's gender-blindness in his assertion, Hall et al. (1993) charge that Anderson has failed to acknowledge that 'women and men may imagine such communities... in very different ways' (p. 159). Hagan (2009) also underlines that Anderson's 'imagined community' is constituted by 'flesh and blood' (p. 1) with strong gender, as well as racial, connotations. Similarly, Sharp (1996) asserts that, while Anderson's imagined community assumes an imagined citizen, that this citizen is gendered is an aspect he has neglected to explore. Anderson also claims that cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers are emblematic of a sense of fraternity, and the immortality and mythical origin of the nation. However, Sharp cogently reckons that 'the soldier is not called Sarah or Lucy or Jane' (p. 99). Subsequently, these scholars call for the recognition of the different ways in which women and men become national subjects and also for the need to interrogate gender in the production of national consciousness, nationhood and national identity.

Unlike Anderson, Smith (1991, 1998), another leading scholar of the nation and commonly referred to as a 'primordialist', foregrounds power relations amongst ethnicities within a nation as essential to nationhood. He theorises the nation as a historical community with common myths, memories, histories and cultures, which dates the origin of the nation much further back than the modernists' argument. Smith places a particular emphasis on 'symbols,

myths, values and memories, attachments, customs and traditions, law, institutions, routines and habits', all of which he claims make up 'the complex community of the nation' (1998, p. 138). In fact, these components are what emotionally charges people and what binds and mobilises them. Significant in his theorisation is that the emphasis on common myths, traditions, memories, culture, language and ancestry, in fact illustrates power differentials amongst ethnies and that it is those of the dominant ethnic group that have come to represent 'the national' – a power that this group has had to impose its own traditions, history, customs and culture as 'national' while suppressing those of others. In this way an illusion of national unity and solidarity is constructed and reinforced.

Responding to Smith's theorisation, Yuval-Davis (1997) is astonished that even the primordialists, who regard the nation as a historic community that has been reproduced over the years, have ignored women in their analyses. Instead, intellectuals or bureaucracy have claimed the credit for the construction and reproduction of the nation. Arguing that the nation is profoundly gendered, she forcefully asserts that women must be recognised for their contribution to the biological, cultural and symbolic reproduction of the nation. She goes on to claim that 'a proper understanding of either [gender or nation] cannot afford to ignore the ways they are informed and constructed by each other' (1997, p. 21). Naturally, she calls for an examination of the positions and positioning of women in investigating the nation and nationhood.

Only very recently and very partially have women been included in the mainstream discourses on the nation, nationalism and national identities (Yuval-Davis, 1997). A question that begs is, 'why are women usually 'hidden' in the various theorizations of the nationalist phenomena?' (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 2). Scholars lay the blame on the ideology that divided the social space into the private and the public, which has ascribed women to the private and men to the public arena (Jung, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 1997). As the nation has been defined as

part of the public sphere, it has been regarded as ideologically and politically inconsequential and irrelevant to women. As a result, women's contributions and histories to the construction of the nation and nationhood have been marginalised and made invisible in hegemonic discourses (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Indeed, this is a neglect that 'feminist scholars have sought to remedy by demonstrating that gender is central to the project of fashioning national identity' (Wilford, 1998, p. 8).

### South Korea as an Androcentric Nation

The Tan-gun myth, the story of the origin of the (South) Korean nation, highlights the symbols of male power and superiority, as well as gender roles. The myth narrates that Hwanung (literally meaning 'heavenly male') descended to Earth with his entourage and magical power. Anxious to become human, a bear and a tiger sought Hwanung's advice to fulfil their wishes, for which he ordered them to live in a cave without sunlight and to survive only with garlic for one hundred days. Whereas the impatient tiger failed to observe the instruction, the bear endured and was successfully transformed into a woman. Hwanung then married the bear-woman and begot Tan-gun, the founder of Korea (Moon, 1998). The representation of gender in the story bears a particular significance in understanding the positioning of women in South Korea. The myth makes it abundantly clear that women's only contribution to the creation of the Korean nation was 'the provision of a proto-nationalist womb', implying that it is 'ultimately the community of men, created by an extraordinary man, in which women exist only as its precondition' (Moon, 1998, p. 41). As such, the story of the origin of the (South) Korean nation shows how deep-seated the nation's androcentric orientation is.



Hogan (2003) defines nations as ‘discursive constructs’ which are ‘constructions of the character, the culture and the historical trajectory of a people’ (p. 100). She then argues that such constructions are ‘acts of inclusion and exclusion’ (p. 100). In fact, they are *active* acts of inclusion and exclusion. In South Korea, the systematic exclusion of women from the public, with all its consequences, has been rationalised by Confucianism and militarism, which together account for the stronghold of the androcentric character of the nation.

Confucianism, which is believed to have been introduced to Korea before the year AD372 (Keum, 2000), was established as the ruling principle of the nation and began to hold a firm grip over the lives of Koreans in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Kim, 2003). Confucian doctrine centres on heterosexuality, gender differences and patriarchy. With gender as the key stabilising principle, it essentialises gender and biological differences between men and women (Moon, 1998; Kim, 2003), confining women exclusively to private space. (South) Korean women have long been socially and politically compelled to be, first and foremost, the daughter, wife and mother, by whom they have been spoken for. This implies that a woman’s relation to the nation was submerged as a social relation to a man and also mediated by men (McClintock, 1995). Furthermore, under strict policing and scrutiny, they have been encouraged to foster so-called ‘female’ virtues such as selflessness, patience, humility, forgiveness and sacrifice (Kim, 2003), and the attribute valued most in women has been their reproductive capacity, particularly their potential capacity to bear sons (Cha et al., 1979 as cited in Kim, 2003). This particular gendering has been mythologised, as evidenced by the idealisation of Shin Saimdang, the face on a South Korea banknote, who in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was a prominent artist and poet herself and, perhaps more importantly, a wise mother of Yulgok, a renowned South Korean Confucian scholar. Thus, South Korean women have been scripted into the national imaginary in a different manner from men. All this oppression and rigid prescription have produced formidable notions of ‘appropriate’ masculinity and

femininity, and manhood and womanhood. Furthermore, they have produced and reinforced the social difference between men and women as ‘a category of nature’ (McClintock, 1995, p. 358), giving gender hierarchy and gender relations a look of inevitability.

Coupled with Confucian ethics, South Korea’s militarism has reinforced and celebrated hyper-heterosexuality and gender hierarchy and has been a significant contributor to the construction of South Korea’s androcentric nationhood (Jung, 2005; Kwon, 2005; Moon, 1998). Having undergone in living memory a series of crises of national survival and identity, such as the Japanese annexation from 1910 to 1945, the partitioning of the Korean peninsula into South and North Korea in 1948, and the Korean war (1950-1953), South Korean governments have emphasised building a strong nation and begun the militarisation of the nation, which has penetrated deeply into politics, economics and education (Kwon, 2005). Furthermore, the governments from the 1960s through the 1980s were heavily male-and-military-oriented and facilitated the militarisation of the nation even further (Moon, 1998). Androcentrism tinted with militarism has placed a premium on male-bonding and solidarity and, needless to say, all of this has determined national morality and the character of its nationhood and national identity (Moon, 1998; Kwon, 2005).

It should be noted that South Korea’s relationship with North Korea remains hostile and thorny since 1948, and this compels the Korean peninsula to remain one of the most heavily militarised regions in the world today. Unfortunately, this climate has worked adversely to the rise of a feminist consciousness and movement as it has served to silence and sideline women’s clamour for equality. Attempts to politicise women’s social and political positioning have historically been met with disdain and reprimand. Thus, militarism has caused a considerably delay of the arrival of gender politics and feminist consciousness (Kwon, 2005). As Enloe (1989) perceptively states, in a nation that is in military conflict:

Women who had called for more genuine equality between the sexes ... have been told that now is not the time, the nation is too fragile... Women must be patient, they must wait until the nationalist goal is achieved; *then* relations between women and men can be addressed. 'Not now, later'... (p. 62, italics in original).

Apparently, the postponement of the development of feminist consciousness in the name of national survival has had a dire consequence. Gender is essential in constituting individual subjectivity, which cannot be isolated from other relations of power which constitute that subjectivity. Gender cannot be conveniently suspended or retrieved and be reinserted when social and political circumstances become 'ready' for it because the national imaginary, nationhood and national identity are constructed and sustained by these very processes (Sharp, 1996). Inevitably, the character of South Korea's nationhood and national identity has been profoundly affected by the repression of women's voices. In this socio-cultural and political context, the order of the nation has been 'firmly rooted in essential and hierarchical differences between women and men' (Moon, 1998, p. 57) which in turn has constructed and normalised specific notions of manhood and womanhood and, thereby, the specific nature of nationhood and national identity.

### South Korea, Women and Sport

South Korea's androcentric character and gender order have been well demonstrated in and through sport. It is widely believed that modern sports, such as gymnastics, track and field, football, baseball, basketball, tennis and swimming, were first introduced to South Korea by Christian missionaries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Korea Sports Council, 1990 as cited in Lee, 2002). Since their introduction they have been closely associated with the expression

of South Koreanness politically and ideologically, which was well displayed during the Japanese annexation and the military regimes. In particular, the military government in the 1960s and 1970s heralded significant advances in the fields of sport (Ha and Mangan, 2002). Perceiving the important role of sport in enhancing national solidarity, and the nation's symbolic power and international reputation, the government founded many of the existing sporting bodies and national games and heavily promoted 'elite sports policy' and a 'popular sports policy', a tradition sustained by subsequent governments (Ha and Mangan, 2002). These efforts have culminated in South Korea's many achievements in international sporting competitions, especially since the 1980s.

However, needless to say, such national investment and attention have been heavily concentrated towards men's sports and male athletes. Female sport and athletes have largely been invisible most of the time and the female population reduced to cheering squads for male sport and male athletes. Thus, 'gender-making' has been a key ideological motivation for modern sport in South Korea. In and through sport, 'common sense' has been systematically promoted that sport is male activity, and this has created bruising consequences for women's sport and public perceptions of sportswomen, especially those in 'masculine-appropriate' sport.

Despite such negligence, contributions of South Korean women to the nation's sporting success have been remarkable. One of their very first success stories on the global stage comes from the Women's World Basketball Championship in the 1960s, but their outstanding achievements were heralded in Los Angeles in 1984 when they won their first Olympic gold medal in archery. Since, despite their late surge, many of them have triumphed internationally, and the summer Olympics are a case in point. From 1948 through 2004, South Korea won 56 gold medals in total and, significantly, 23 of them were collected by women (Shin, 2006). In Beijing and London in 2008 and 2012 they added 5 more in each.

These achievements make one wonder what might have resulted from fair investment and interest in women's sport. Female athletes' success stories and the qualities they have displayed have contributed to the shaping of the character of South Koreaness. Yet these are stories and contributions that have been often overlooked or forgotten in the national imaginary.

## Methodology

The guiding principle of this research comes from the feminist tradition. It is undeniable that male experiences and perspectives, particularly those of bourgeois, white men, have long been the lens through which the social world has been defined, explained and interrogated (Harding, 1987). However, feminist critiques since the 1960s have questioned and challenged the immortality and omnipotence of the privileged 'objective' perspectives in social science that have long spoken for all humanity (Haraway, 1988). Naturally, they have begun to examine the world from women's point of view, striving to redress the existing imbalance in academic research and identifying structural and systematic social inequality (Harding, 1987). South Korean women have endured a substantially limited right to freedom of speech and access to the public sphere. As a result, studying the social world from women's perspectives on the basis of their own experiences has had virtually no history at all until very recently. Keenly aware of this gender imbalance, an objective of this research was to provide South Korean women with an opportunity to narrate their personal experiences and point of views around gender, nation and sport. For this purpose, qualitative interviewing was deemed most suitable.

A number of group interviews took place during the 2008 Beijing and 2012 London Olympics, featuring ethnically-Korean female participants exclusively - 42 in total. 22

women in 6 groups were interviewed during the Beijing Olympics and 20 in 4 groups during the London event. Their ages varied from 19 to 39, and most of them had an undergraduate or post graduate degree. They were all professionals, working for some of the most prominent companies and banks, or were teaching at universities in South Korea. All interviews were undertaken in Seoul, South Korea, with each interview lasting between 90 and 150 minutes. The qualitative group interviews were effective in uncovering what the world looked like from the women's standpoint and how they negotiated their place in society.

Harding (1987) maintains that feminist research is ultimately about a power struggle. She explains that this is because what an oppressed or marginalised group seeks is a recognition of the oppression, an attempt to find solutions to change it, an identification of underlying forces behind it, and a striving to redress the power imbalance and achieve emancipation. Under Confucianism and militarism, women in South Korea have long been subjugated by patriarchal institutions, laws, customs and traditions. As a result, South Korean men and women occupy different social spaces and they experience nation differently. The research aimed to examine how South Korean women perceived and experienced gender and the nation as revealed through the spectacle of the female weightlifter Jang Mi-ran and how they evaluated their place in society.

## Discussion

### *Sport Stars as Representatives of National Character and Morality*

Hogan (2003) argues that 'a shared sense of nationness is created and maintained in part through representations of the character, culture, and historical trajectory of a people' (p. 101). Sport stars are a prime site for the construction of such representations. They operate as national symbols that, implicitly or explicitly, set and stand for national value and character,

and this is why they are argued to be ‘in many ways a source of collective identity and pride in both national and supra-national settings’ (Archetti, 2001, p. 154). As representatives of their nation, sport stars are assumed to mirror the character of their nation. This explains why Britain fell into despair when one of its finest, Paula Radcliffe, abandoned a race in tears at the 2004 Olympics (Walton, 2010). British media responses to her quitting were brutal and by no means sympathetic. This was because she failed to measure up to national expectations and, more crucially, because her nation was symbolically relegated to the status of ‘a quitter’ through her. As much as Radcliffe’s successes prior to the Athens despair were equated with British successes, her failure was identified as a British failure (Walton, 2010).

Leading up to the Beijing Olympics, Jang Mi-ran was put on a pedestal just like Radcliffe prior to the Athens Olympics. With the silver medal in Athens in 2004 and success in the world championships in 2005, 2006, and 2007, national expectations of her at the 2008 Olympics were sky-high. As anticipated, Jang won the gold medal, setting a new world record en route, and drove the entire nation electrifyingly wild. The research revealed that, as well as being extremely proud of her unrivalled dominance in weightlifting, most participants were exceedingly appreciative of the lone battle, and physical and mental hardship that she must have endured to achieve what she had achieved. Her most admired qualities according to many interviewees were her tenacity and perseverance in pursuit of a new world record. Jang secured the gold medal in the relatively early stages but continued to compete, aiming to break the world record that she herself had set previously, about which a postgraduate student, Lee Jung-en, enthused: ‘she could have stopped but she didn’t. She kept on going till she set a new world record. I cannot not admire her for such a dauntless spirit’. Discussing Radcliffe’s status as a national hero, Walton (2010) claims that her work ethic, hardships and countless training sessions made her a representative of Britain and that this has reinforced the ideology of meritocracy as British morality. Similarly, Jang was hailed by the participants

for her work ethic, determination, steadfastness, competitiveness and indomitable spirit. These are qualities that have gained tremendous social approval in South Korea since the 1960s, the beginning of the national building process, and Jang reaffirmed them as key attributes of a successful career.

Jang Mi-ran was applauded as a national hero, presumably demonstrating the character of South Korea. However, it was only half the story. Her female sex carried other interpretations, which offered insights into the gendered aspect of South Korea's nationhood. Miller et al. (2001) argue that, 'in Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Australia and the USA, the most valorised sporting body-as-national-exemplar is male, white and heterosexual' (p. 87). They then pose a question:

What happens when one or more of these characteristics is manifestly absent in representations of the nation, or when subordinated female, coloured, or homosexual bodies behave transgressively? (p. 87)

This is an important question which helps unearth the ways in which South Korea's nationhood is gendered, and it will be addressed in the following sections.

#### *Excessive attention to Jang Mi-ran's appearance and 'deviant' femininity*

The research undertaken by the author on Jang Mi-ran shortly after she won the silver medal in the 2004 Athens Olympics revealed South Korean women's denouncement of her achievement and femininity (Oh, 2006). Her silver medal was belittled and often bluntly pronounced as meaningless. Also, she was declared as a woman who unwisely gave up being a 'woman' in pursuit of success in a 'worthless' sport. At the heart of this cynicism and devaluation was the issue of femininity, which Jang projected, particularly on the basis of her rather sizeable body and physical strength.



Somewhat differently, the research conducted after she earned the gold medal in Beijing in 2008 showed considerable changes in women's perceptions of her. However, negative and cynical sentiments reappeared. Jang's passion for, and dedication to, weightlifting were ignored, and her profession vilified as a temporary career en route to the 'real' career of a woman, which was, marriage and procreation. Some women anticipated Jang's departure from weightlifting in the near future in pursuit of her 'true' career.

These responses reflected the tenacity of Confucian legacy. A woman's main role in the nation remains, as described in the Tan-gun myth and as idealised through Shin Saimdang, the provision of the womb and rearing children. Interestingly, Jang's 'overweight' body, 170cm and 115kg, was deemed potentially causing a reproductive challenge medically. Concerns over her 'deviant' femininity and, by implication, her presumed inability to procreate, carried a deeper weight because it meant that she was considered detrimental to the continuation of the nation. When she was perceived as antithetical to 'traditional' femininity it implied that she could fail to fulfil her socially and culturally prescribed role as a 'national womb', symbolically threatening to extinguish the nation.

Heterosexuality, as the 'norm' prescribed by Confucian principles, compels men and women to lead a uniform way of life and prevents them from imagining or leading a life beyond the prescription. The deprivations and suppression of women's freedom and rights are 'symbolic violence', which Bourdieu (1998) defines as 'violence which extorts submission, which is not perceived as such, based on 'collective expectations' or socially inculcated beliefs' (p. 103). Yet many interviewees appeared uncritically compliant with Confucian gender order in the name of 'tradition', which enables such repression to remain legitimised or unnamed as violence, thereby effectively hindering political actions to liberate them.

As noted, the research found a renewal of disrespect for Jang Mi-ran to a certain extent, but this was considerably toned down and a sense of awe and admiration was predominant. Indeed, a surprise of the research was the extent to which women's perspectives of Jang Mi-ran had altered since 2004. Quite contrary to the findings of the 2004 research, the women who participated in interviews in 2008 and 2012 were overwhelmingly thrilled and awe-struck, and commented favourably on her work ethic, dedication, achievements and unorthodox femininity. Jang came fourth in London 2012, yet nearly every interviewee highly commended her sporting career and performance. She was often praised as 'courageous', 'professional', 'admirable', 'extraordinary', and 'visionary'. For example, claiming that 'she [Jang] has changed the public perceptions not only of sportswomen and weightlifting but of women in general', 29-year-old Son Sook acclaimed Jang's achievements as empowering women.

Ironically, however, remarks on Jang's courage, determination and achievements were often juxtaposed with a comment on her appearance as typified below:

In a society in which everyone is screaming for good looks, she [Jang] has been making so much sacrifice for a weightlifting career. She's been sacrificing her youth, a time when she may want to go on a diet to look pretty and make a boyfriend. She can't do these because she has to maintain the weight (Kim Young-sun)

Conversations among the participants frequently turned to Jang's appearance, body size and femininity. A woman's good looks are highly valued in South Korea. As Kim (2003) delineates, Korean women who had been confined to private sphere started to be brought out to public sphere into schools and factories since the Japanese annexation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their visibility in public space has remained strong after independence in 1945 because the nation needed women's, as well as men's, labour for national building. During the

nation-building period, Confucianism was re-packaged as 'authentic' Korean culture, perpetuating gender hierarchy. This has coexisted with the strong presence of capitalism since the 1980s, rendering women fully visible as consumers, 'free to be observed and appreciated' in public space (Kim, 2003, p. 103). The coexistence of conservative gender order and liberalism associated with consumerism has further transformed women into an object of male gaze, and this trend has intensified women's preoccupation with their appearance. As Kim asserts, beauty now occupies a high level of social significance in South Korea to the point that it has become 'a *requirement* of decorum for women' (p. 107, italics original). It was little wonder, therefore, that the focus of the interviews was very often directed towards Jang's appearance rather than her professional career and achievements.

This social milieu highlighted Jang's dedication to weightlifting more as Lee pointed out earlier. She acknowledged that Jang's courage to stand firm against such socio-cultural pressure was what made her extraordinary, for which she professed to have deep respect and admiration. The high social value endowed upon women's good looks is highly problematic because it has little impact on structural gender inequalities; rather, it serves to perpetuate male dominance; it is problematic also because it defines and judges women's value by patriarchal framing (Coy and Garner, 2010). In this way, relations between men and women remain marked out by enduring inequalities (McRobbie, 2004). Jang Mi-ran's retirement was anticipated after the London Olympics, and many interviewees expressed their relief that she could soon lose weight, beautify her looks and attract a male suitor. The premium value placed on women's appearance exhibited by remarks such as these is a confirmation of women still requiring male approval for their worth and self-esteem.

*'What on earth is she thinking? 'Mindless', 'Hideous': Male Repulsion and Animosity*

Originally, the research did not intend to document men's perceptions of Jang Mi-ran, but during the interviews, many women introduced the views of their husband, boyfriend or brother regarding Jang, on which they agreed or disagreed. As the analysis of femininity cannot be isolated from that of masculinity, to better understand the women's conceptions of gender and nation it is worth examining the men's perspectives.

Without a single exception, all of the men's comments introduced were scathing and disparaging with respect to Jang Mi-ran's body, career and success. For them, Jang was 'mindless' because she had got herself wrongly engaged in a sport like weightlifting. Adjectives such as 'unwomanly', 'unfeminine', and 'hideous' abounded in describing her. One comment was illuminating: 'What is the worth of her gold medal if she can't find a man to marry?' The men were united in denigrating her appearance and achievements. One comment resonated with the rest: 'what on earth is the value of a woman lifting all those heavy bars?' He then declared it 'pointless'. All of these statements, in fact, highlighted Jang's exceptional courage on her career choice. What was revealing from those comments was men's fear of powerful, self-sufficient and high-achieving women and their anxieties over possible loss of their sense of male identity and superiority. Her strong physique and resounding success apparently overwhelmed the men and symbolically disempowered them.

In South Korea, being faced with combatant North Korea militarism has been a solidifier of male superiority and dominance. Yuval-Davis (1997) points out that women's citizenship is problematic in nations in certain situations such as in war. Women's citizenship in these communities, she (1997) argues, 'is usually of a dual nature: on the one hand they are included in the general body of citizens; on the other hand there are always rules, regulations and policies which are specific to them' (p. 24). Compulsory military service in South Korea exemplifies this. South Korea's constitution mandates four citizenship obligations that *all* citizens must comply with, one of which is to defend the nation. However, a sub-legislation

rules that this is exclusive to men (Jung, 2005, my emphasis). This, consciously and unconsciously, decides women's place in nation and establishes the androcentric character of nationhood. Men must serve the nation, but women are collectively exempted. As Jung (2005) observes, under such regulations women can only be situated as inferior to men socially and politically. They categorically become the vulnerable and protected. Positioned as such, South Korean women are relegated to their biology and their primary role is to be the 'carriers of nationalist wombs to deliver heirs and potential warriors who can defend the nation' (Moon, 1998, p. 52). Under Confucian culture and militarism it is inconceivable that women, objects of protection, fight for the nation alongside men because it could destabilise the core value of what it means to be a man in South Korea (Jung, 2005).

Identity politics and power relations lie at the heart of the men's debates on Jang Mi-ran. She poses a symbolic danger to the male sense of identity and superiority as Na Jung-eun sharply located her brother's cynicism in his sense of insecurity. She argued:

Jang is doing what most men cannot do [lifting 326kg]. A woman is doing what most men cannot do. She makes them feel inferior and, naturally, they try to deride or devalue her achievement. Little wonder that they are hostile to her success.

Kim Min-ji's remark that 'many men must find her too successful and powerful for their male ego', was a perceptive one too. Throughout history, (South) Korean men have found their place in society by 'Othering' women. Naturally, Jang's strong physique, self-sufficiency and capability have far-reaching implications for them. She apparently requires no male protection and, what's more, she can even protect men. Thus, her large, muscular body and 'deviant' femininity, together with her successful professional career, can symbolically inflict a sense of injury to men and endanger their status quo. This was precisely why Jang's unapologetic and subversive femininity was lambasted by men. Disdain and

belittling were their strategies to reaffirm women as the objects of male desire and to locate her back to 'where she belonged'. In this manner, they could restore gender order and reassure themselves a sense of privilege and dominance.

### *Jang Mi-ran's retirement and her uncertain post-retirement career prospects*

Nearly all of the interviewees were very critical of Jang Mi-ran's (perceived) uncertain post-retirement career prospects despite her exceptionally successful career. That is, Jang generated heated criticisms over sportswomen's lack of career development and advancement opportunities in their post-retirement era. 32-year-old Kim Sun-ae, working for a multinational company, represented this sentiment:

However great she has been, Jang has very little chance to become a national coach. A man with much much less success will take that job. Such injustice is all too common in our country

Consensus amongst the interviewees was that, considering her immense work ethic, dedication and enthusiasm for weightlifting, together with her charisma, success and popularity, she should be appointed to an influential position in the weightlifting field, otherwise it would be inexcusably wrong and unfair. All too often, however, female athletes are rarely appointed to managerial or administrative positions once they retire. McClintock (1995) claims that 'no nation in the world gives women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state' (p. 353). Needless to say, at the heart of this restriction stand the specific notions of womanhood and femininity, which have fettered women's aspirations, freedom and rights, and which evidently suggests that the nation is inevitably gendered.

Limited access to resources and positions is another tough battle for South Korean women to fight. Hogan (2009) asserts that women's restricted access is a materialised effect

of the naturalisation of specific notions of womanhood and femininity. In other words, the 'traditional' version of womanhood and femininity has justified the very unequal material conditions and unequal distributions of resources between men and women; it has rationalised women's restricted access to resources and opportunities, perpetuating gender inequalities. Evidence in South Korean sport is that the availability of managerial and administrative positions still remains exceedingly tokenistic to women since attributes required of them are very distant from social idealised 'feminine' qualities. Jang's professional success and yet (perceived) uncertain post-retirement career opportunities painfully reminded the all-female participants of women's limited opportunities for career advancement and social injustice inflicted on the female sex. Jang was an aching reminder of their own reality of the gender discrimination they themselves had faced, or could face, at their workplace.

Over the last several decades, women's social status has undergone considerable improvement in South Korea. However, Confucian tradition still prevails in coexistence with the principles of capitalism. Statistics show a glimpse of this. In 2013, 74.5% of women enrolled at university (67.4% for men) (MBC, 24 Nov 2014), and yet, in the same year, only 53.9% of women were employed outside the home. Also significantly, a wide gender gap persists as women earn only 64% of men's wage (Hankyung, 5 Jan 2015). Qualitatively, more women are now employed as doctors, lawyers, government officials, headteachers and diplomats (MBC, 24 Nov 2014), but they are severely under-represented in middle-management and decision-making positions (Hankyung, 5 Jan 2015).

Women are faced with systematic mistreatment, inequality and discrimination in every corner of South Korean society. Yet it is also true that the society is in the process of remaking and revising what it means to be a man and a woman in contemporary South Korea. This social climate has enabled many participants to dream of Jang's future as 'a national

coach or someone important in weightlifting, discovering many talents, developing them to become future Jang Mi-rans and taking them to the Olympics' (Kang Mi-sun). Many hoped that, through these roles, she would set an example to modern South Korean women. That post-retirement career would, of course, matter-of-factly follow a male athlete with career equivalents to Jang's.

## Conclusion

Hogan (2009) asserts that stories and representations that convey a nation's character, accomplishments and defining traits constitute and sustain the nation. Jang Mi-ran and her sporting career exhibit the difficulties and possibilities that South Korean women are faced with. On the one hand she displays the stronghold of conservative gender order, and on the other hand she has rewritten a script for women and positioned them differently in the national imaginary. The stories and representations of Jang Mi-ran have been continually reproduced and disseminated in South Korea in recent years with potential to shake the foundations of long-standing 'traditional' gender ideology and to alter the character and defining traits of South Koreanness. For instance, many participants demanded for her to be introduced into history textbooks and for her story to be told and retold as part of the nation's 'official' history.

According to Hogan (2009), women are 'internal Others' who are 'marginalised groups within a nation who are represented as significantly different from, and often inferior to, the dominant group' (p. 9). As she stresses, they are, however, fully capable of producing alternative discourses of the nation and national identity in which they can play a main part. In other words, they can construct 'counter-narratives of nation' which 'continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries' (Bhabha, 1990, p. 300). They have the potential to disrupt



the hegemonic understanding of the nation, nationhood and national identity, and this, in turn, may bring about social and political shifts and contribute to changes in women's status in society (Hogan, 2009).

This research has demonstrated that counter-narratives co-written by Jang and the interview participants were potentially subversive because Jang's 'unfeminine' qualities, including her work ethic, intelligence, perseverance, fortitude and competitiveness were highly applauded. Their counter-narratives could also disrupt male hegemony because participants, to a varying degree, criticised and challenged dominant gender norms and the established order of the nation. Moreover, with Jang as a reference point, many interviewees questioned material inequality between men and women and voiced the need for equality in society. Overall, as an emphatic gender symbol, Jang compelled many participants to rethink what it means to be a woman in South Korea today, which could alter the character of the nation.

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